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ABSTRACT

Two studies were conducted by a New England university during the 1986-87 school year to gain a better understanding of the factors influencing individuals' decisions to attend graduate/professional school. One purpose of the two projects was to develop school-specific databases to: provide graduate school administrators with information regarding their applicant pools; highlighting influential factors in the matriculation decision process; identifying applicants' sources of information regarding the schools; and identifying major competitors. For the Graduate School of International Affairs, accepted applicants (166 matriculants and 187 non-matriculants) were surveyed by mail, with response rates of 63% and 45% respectively. For the School of Dental Medicine, 592 prospective applicants were contacted by telephone, of whom 87% completed a telephone interview. Results of both projects indicated that issues of quality were of primary concern, and admissions activities with a personal touch (contact with faculty or students, tour of facilities, attending classes) appeared to be important influences. Contains 2 references. (Author/KM)

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BEYOND THE BACCALAUREATE: USING ADMISSIONS RESEARCH AT THE GRADUATE/PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL LEVEL

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ABSTRACT

The primary objective of this paper is to describe what one New England university has done to gain a better understanding of the factors that have influenced individuals' decisions to attend graduate/professional school. During the 1986-87 academic year, two major research projects were undertaken. One component of these two projects was to develop school specific "micro" data bases, which were based on individual student responses. Major goals associated with creating these data bases include: (1) providing graduate school administrators with information regarding their applicant pools, (2) highlighting influential factors in the matriculation decision process, (3) identifying applicants' sources of information regarding the schools, and (4) identifying major competitors.

BEYOND THE BACCALAUREATE: USING ADMISSIONS RESEARCH AT THE GRADUATE/PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL LEVEL

In 1983, Robert Turcotte posed two questions: "Enrollment management at the graduate level; is it needed? Can it be accomplished?" (Turcotte, R. B., 1983, p. 24) He concluded that the answer to the first question was "yes" and that the answer to the second was "yet to be determined". He went on to explain that "Graduate education as an entity is perceived to be far behind the undergraduate in establishing a body of knowledge regarding admissions characteristics and activities of students; methods of recruiting; utilization of available technology; centralization of effort and funding; enrollment management and modeling" (Turcotte, p. 28). It was continued concern over the lack of current information regarding the types of students who enroll in graduate and professional schools and how they finance their education that prompted the 1986 study *Students in Graduate and Professional Education: What We Know and Need to Know* (Hauptman, 1986). One of Hauptman's conclusions was that current aggregate data collection efforts do not provide sufficient insight into "students' decisions to continue their education beyond the baccalaureate level" (Hauptman, p. 90).

The primary objective of this paper is to describe what one New England university has done to gain a better understanding of the factors that have influenced individuals' decisions to attend graduate/professional school. During the 1986-87 academic year, two major research projects were undertaken – one for the university's Graduate School of International Affairs (GSIA) and the other for its School of Dental Medicine (SDM). One component of these two projects was to develop school specific "micro" data bases, which were based on individual student responses. Major goals associated with creating these data bases include: (1) providing graduate school administrators with information regarding their applicant pools, (2) highlighting influential factors in the matriculation decision process, (3) identifying applicants' sources of information regarding the schools, and (4) identifying major competitors.

While the studies shared similar goals and objectives, each was quite distinct. The studies were conducted by different groups of individuals employing different data gathering techniques and research methodologies. Following is a description of each of the projects.

GRADUATE SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS PROJECT

In the Spring of 1987, the GSIA study was conducted in-house under the auspices of the Office of Institutional Planning. The primary source of data for this study was a survey of accepted applicants. Approximately one-month after applicants were notified of the GSIA admissions decision, questionnaires were mailed to all applicants who were offered admission for Fall 1987.[1] The survey instrument was designed to garner the following information: (1) factors associated with applicants final matriculation decision, (2) institutions to which GSIA accepted applicants applied and the admission decisions of each institution, (3) financial packages offered at graduate and professional schools, (4) sources of information concerning the graduate school, (5) the importance of admissions related activities in the final matriculation decision, and (6) general demographic characteristics of the applicant pool. Slightly different versions of the questionnaires were mailed to matriculants and non-matriculants. The response rates were 63 percent and 45 percent respectively.[2]

Findings

Influential Factors

Applicants were asked to list the three factors which most influenced their decision to attend a particular graduate/professional school. There was a great deal of consistency in applicants' listings of the various factors important to their final

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[1] Survey instruments are available upon request.

[2] Of the 166 matriculants who were surveyed, 104 returned completed questionnaires. In contrast, 85 of the 187 non-matriculants surveys were returned.

enrollment decisions (Table 1). The reputation of their chosen institution, appropriateness of the academic program, and location of the school emerged as the most important aspects of all those surveyed. The amount of scholarship awarded was also a significant factor, but this factor was cited most frequently by non-matriculants.[3] Contacts made with school personnel or admissions activities were not listed as important reasons for applicants' enrollment decisions. Thus, it appears that most respondents based their decisions on the reputation, program offerings and location of their chosen school in both matriculant and non-matriculant groups, with the major factor differentiating the two being the financial aid factor.

TABLE 1[4]

MOST FREQUENTLY LISTED FACTORS
INFLUENCING ENROLLMENT DECISIONS

Matriculants		Non-Matriculants	
1. Academic reputation	50%	1. Academic reputation	42%
2. Appropriate program	50%	2. Appropriate program	38%
3. General reputation	46%	3. Better scholarship	31%
4. Curriculum	30%	4. Location	31%
5. Location	20%	5. Other	23%
6. Faculty reputation	15%	6. General reputation	21%
7. Cross-registration	15%	7. Better aid	14%
8. Placement record	13%	8. Curriculum	11%
9. Other	11%	9. Joint degree option	11%
10 Better scholarship	9%	10. Campus life	10%
11. Faculty contact	8%	11. Cross-registration	10%
12. Joint degree option	8%	12. Placement record	10%
13. Students' reception	6%	13. Internships	8%
14. Campus life	4%	14. Faculty reputation	8%
15. Better aid	3%	15. Research opportunity	4%
16. Internships	3%	16. Faculty contact	2%
17. Staff contact	3%	17. Current students	2%
18. Current students	3%	18. Reception	1%
19. Research opportunity	1%	19. Staff contact	0%

[3] The importance of scholarship funds became more apparent after comparative analysis of the financial aid packages was conducted. That analysis appeared to substantiate applicants comments.

[4] Percentages given are the proportion of all respondents citing that factor.

Financial Aid

Extensive financial aid information was collected and analyzed as part of this study. About 80% of all applicants requested financial assistance from the GSIA and a slightly smaller percentage did so from all other institutions at which applications were filed. Although respondents were asked to provide the actual dollar amounts awarded by each institution, such specific figures were given far more frequently for grant amounts than for loan or work study awards. From the analysis of those applicants who did supply aid information, a few general trends are evident: the relative percentage of applicants (overall) receiving some grant or loan assistance was roughly equivalent for the GSIA and other institutions; the average amount of loan award was similar for the GSIA and other institutions; and the average grant award and total aid package was considerably larger at other institutions than was that awarded by the GSIA, both in the matriculant and non-matriculant groups. These trends were also seen when the GSIA's financial aid packages were compared to those of its top ten competitors (in terms of number of applications filed), or to the institutions that applicants listed as their first alternate (matriculant) or matriculating institution (non-matriculant). Thus for those applicants for whom financial aid was a large factor, the GSIA's aid package was likely to have been a detrimental consideration.

Sources of Information

Accepted applicants were asked to comment on various sources of information of which they may have availed themselves when considering the GSIA. These sources are ranked according to the frequency of reported use. (Table 2).

TABLE 2[5]

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

	Matriculants	Non-matriculants
1. GSIA catalog	94%	96%
2. College friends	53%	64%
3. GSIA alumni/ae	54%	52%
4. Work colleagues	49%	44%
5. Undergraduate faculty	45%	39%
6. Other[6]	29%	29%
7. Peterson guide	24%	29%
8. Career placement office	22%	32%
9. Newspaper articles citing GSIA	20%	17%
10. GSIA on-campus recruiter	8%	24%

There appear to be no obvious distinctions between matriculants and non-matriculants. The most frequently cited source of information about the GSIA in either group was its catalog. It appears from an examination of items ranked 2 through 5 that applicants also obtained information about the GSIA through a variety of means involving a network of people familiar with the school at various levels. Somewhat more non-matriculants listed college friends, their career placement office, or a GSIA recruiter as information sources, though these differences are not large. It appears that at least at the level of observation afforded by this survey, non-matriculants availed themselves of the same types of information about the GSIA as did those who elected to matriculate.

Specific examination of matriculants' descriptions under "Other" suggests that GSIA's faculty (8 citations), present or past GSIA students (6 citations), and contact with professional or government international organizations (such as the Peace Corps or the State Department, 5 citations) were also information sources about the program.

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[5] Percentages given are based on the number of respondents (matriculants and non-matriculants) who gave some answer to the item, and represent those who answered affirmatively that the given category was an information source. It should be noted that one difficulty with this item is that many of those not providing responses might have been indicating that the given item was not an information source. This possibility would make the overall percentages given in this table lower than reported.

[6] This was an optional item which some respondents could have ignored.

The corresponding comments submitted by non-matriculants listed relatives and friends (5), visit or interview at the GSIA (5), and professional organizations (4) most frequently.

We may infer from this that the GSIA's faculty and students played a significant role in shaping some matriculants' decisions to come to the GSIA, but the difference in numbers of these comments (and the fact that they were optional) does not permit the conclusion that matriculants were significantly more informed about the GSIA than were non-matriculants by people knowing the school intimately. This may be a factor, yet it is also possible that non-matriculants did not pursue such information as actively, given a difference in financial burden, and/or in the appropriateness of the GSIA's program vis a vis their selected alternate institution.

That these "Other" responses indicate important factors is born out by respondents' listing of their "Best" source of information (Table 3), where "Other" was cited more frequently than any other item except for "GSIA catalog" for both matriculants and non-matriculants.

TABLE 3

BEST SOURCES OF INFORMATION[7]

Source	Matriculant	Non-Matriculant
1. GSIA catalog	42%	56%
2. Other	18%	12%
3. Undergraduate faculty	15%	7%
4. GSIA alumni/ae	13%	11%
5. Work colleagues	6%	2%
6. College friends	5%	5%
7. Career placement office	2%	0%
8. Peterson guide	1%	1%
9. GSIA recruiter	0%	6%
10. Newspaper articles	0%	0%

[7] Percentages given are based on the number of respondents who provided an answer to this item and exclude individuals who did not.

The relative importance of each of these sources of input within the matriculant and non-matriculant groups is quite similar. The only clear differences are in the frequencies of the items "GSIA catalog" and "Undergraduate faculty". The higher percentage of non-matriculants who cited the GSIA's catalog as their best source of information is consistent with the possibility that these applicants did not have as much first-hand contact with the GSIA as did those who enrolled here. Perhaps these individuals, having a higher per person acceptance rate overall, were less likely to pursue more in-depth information from any one school and relied more on peripheral sources such as catalogs in general. Another option is that some portion of the matriculants, having more access to the GSIA faculty or students beforehand, were impressed by these contacts and swayed favorably by them, while non-matriculants had fewer personal contacts with the GSIA even before the application process was initiated.

Activities Relevant to Matriculation

Accepted applicants were asked to evaluate a list of activities in which they might have participated directly. Specifically they were asked to indicate the importance of each activity on their decision to matriculate at their institution of choice.[8] In Tables 4, the nine activities are ranked in order of how many respondents cited each as "Very important" (highest value on the scale) within the matriculant and non-matriculant groups, and the average rating for that activity for all those participating in it (lower values indicate more important activities).

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[8] Respondents could rate an activity as Very important (value of 1), Important (2), Somewhat important (3), Not important (4), or Didn't do (8). In determining average ratings for an item, "Didn't do" responses were excluded.

TABLE 4[9]

Activities Relevant To Matriculation Decisions

Activity	# Cited "Very important" (Average rating)	
	Matriculant	Non-matriculant
1. Mail from admissions	32 (2.1)	21 (2.3)
2. Student meetings	21 (1.8)	22 (1.7)
3. Other	21 (1.3)	14 (1.2)
4. Faculty meetings	16 (1.4)	19 (1.6)
5. Interview	14 (1.9)	17 (1.9)
6. Phone contact	9 (2.7)	10 (2.6)
7. Reception for students	9 (1.8)	7 (2.4)
8. Class visit	8 (1.9)	13 (1.9)
9. The GSIA representative	1 (2.5)	7 (2.2)

It appears that little difference exists between matriculants and non-matriculants with respect to activities relevant to their final matriculation decisions. Based on average ratings, Other, Faculty meetings, and Student meetings were the most important activities for each of these groups at their respective institutions of choice. This is consistent with the finding that these represent important sources of information for prospective students. Also of interest are the average ratings for "Reception for students" (matriculants) and "Class visit" (both groups), which though infrequently cited as "very important" were given fairly high average ratings. This may be due simply to the fact that those few individuals who engaged in those activities were those for whom such personal activities were a priority from the beginning. However, it may also be the case that these are activities which the GSIA might be encouraged to engage more applicants in, if possible, given the positive response to them — particularly given the uniformly favorable comments about the GSIA admissions contact provided by non-matriculants.

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[9] The values for the matriculant group represent activities important for acceptance of The GSIA's enrollment offer, while those for the non-matriculants represent activities important for acceptance of enrollment at the respondent's chosen institution.

A point worth noting is the very high average rating given "Other" and "Faculty meetings" by both groups. Of the written comments supplied by matriculants under "Other", the most frequently cited involved either faculty contact or some mention of the school's personable reception of the applicant.[10] The comments offered by non-matriculants did not cluster into clear groups and were more diverse. The most frequently cited being financial aid offer at chosen institution, alumni contact, and faculty meetings.

Judging from these observations, the GSIA seems to have left a positive impression on those individuals who have been involved in more direct ways with the school, and also seems to win high marks for contacts with its faculty. Thus, it may be to the GSIA's advantage to increase the frequency of such occurrences , if possible. The caveat to this claim is that non-matriculants rated the same factors as highly at their chosen alternates, suggesting that these are "generically" significant activities in the application process, and that variables other than those in the list provided played a larger role in shaping accepted applicants final decisions.[11]

Suggestions for Further Study

This study has provided considerable information regarding the characteristics of the applicant pool, the institutions to which the GSIA applicants also applied and at which they were typically accepted, differences in financial aid awards between the GSIA and its competitors, and possible reasons why those that chose the GSIA or another school made these decisions. Some questions are suggested by this study which could be pursued in one or more future projects: What types of colleges do

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[10] (Again, strong generalizations are not permitted from these comments as there are simply not enough of them to warrant firm conclusions. They are provided for reinforcement of the major points.)

[11] One suggestion for future research approaches would be to include items which compared The GSIA and the applicant's chosen alternate directly on some of these other factors, such as financial aid, the applicant's beliefs regarding job placement after graduation, his/her perceptions about The GSIA's (and alternate's) reputation in professional circles, etc., having the respondent list which program (The GSIA or first alternate) they favored in each category.

individuals applying to the GSIA tend to come from, and similarly for those individuals who elect other institutions? What specific career paths do applicants intend to pursue? What types of program offerings are most important within the international affairs category? What is the applicants' relative need for financial assistance compared to other aspects of their personal admissions criteria? What is the applicant's evaluation of the quality of information received through the various sources already assessed in this study? These and other questions follow directly from the analyses reported herein, and from a reading of the various comments offered that were not explicitly requested.

DENTAL SCHOOL PROJECT

In contrast the GSIA study, the School of Dental Medicine (SDM) study was conducted by an outside consulting firm which was guided by an internal enrollment management committee. This committee was comprised of members of the dental school community (faculty, student, alumni, and administrative representatives) and representatives from the university's central administration. The primary source of data for this study was a telephone survey of prospective applicants.[12]

The survey instrument, designed by the consulting firm in collaboration with the internal enrollment management committee, was designed to solicit the following information: 1) prospective applicants level of familiarity with the SDM and some of its major competitors, 2) the importance of specific dental school characteristics in

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[12] The original intent of the study was to survey all individuals who had made inquiries to the dental school. However, the admissions office did not routinely retain this inquiry information. Thus, it was necessary to identify a reasonable population that would serve as a proxy for the inquiry pool. It was determined that all students who had requested that their Dental Aptitude Test scores (DATs) be sent to the school would serve as a reasonable substitution. The names and addresses of those students, who had submitted their scores in 1985 and 1986, were purchased from the American Dental Association (ADA). In addition, the ADA was willing to provide the names and addresses of individuals who had taken the DAT but had not requested that their scores be sent to the School of Dental Medicine.

their choice process, 3) the influence of a variety of information sources on the dental school selection process, 4) factors that influenced their decisions to choose dentistry as a profession, and 5) an evaluation of specific characteristics of the SDM.[13]

The overall response rate to the telephone survey was quite high. Of those prospective applicants contacted[14], 87 percent completed the interview. Of the remaining thirteen percent; five percent refused to completed the interview and eight percent indicated that they were no longer interested in dentistry. For purposes of analysis, survey respondents were categorized into four groups: 1) prospects, 2) inquirers, 3) applicants, and 4) enrollees.[15]

Findings

Influential Factors - Dental School Characteristics

Individuals were queried to ascertain the importance of specific characteristics of dental schools in their decision to select a particular school (Table 5)[16]. Those characteristics that received high marks from respondents included overall quality, quality of clinical program, reputation of producing high quality practitioners, quality of facilities, opportunities for patient contact, overall curriculum, and quality of pre-clinical programs.

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[13] It should be noted that the SDM was not identified as the consulting firm's client.

[14] A total of 592 individuals were contacted.

[15] Prospects were defined as those individuals who took the DAT but did not have their scores submitted to the SDM. Inquirers were defined as those individuals who requested their scores be sent to the SDM, but did not apply to the school. Applicants were identified as those individuals who had made an application to the SDM or indicated that they intended to apply. Individuals who applied and enrolled at the SDM are not included in the applicant category. The enrollee category includes students who are currently enrolled at the SDM or planned to attend.

[16] Respondents were asked to rate each of the characteristics on a scale ranging from 1 to 5. One was "not at all important and five was "extremely important".

Table 5

Importance Ratings of Dental School Characteristics

Characteristic	Enrollees	Applicants	Inquirers	Prospects
Overall Quality	4.81 (1)	4.78 (1)	4.56 (1)	4.45 (1)
Quality of Facilities	4.71 (2)	4.50 (4)	4.43 (3)	4.42 (3)
Quality of Clinical Program	4.64 (3)	4.58 (2)	4.46 (2)	4.42 (3)
High Quality Practitioners	4.64 (3)	4.53 (3)	4.38 (4)	4.45 (1)
Opportunity for Patient Contact	4.57 (5)	4.47 (5)	4.22 (5)	4.31 (5)
Overall Reputation	4.52 (6)	4.18 (9)	4.13 (6)	4.05 (10)
Quality of Preclinical Program	4.45 (7)	4.29 (7)	4.09 (8)	4.17 (8)
Overall Curriculum	4.40 (8)	4.46 (6)	4.11 (7)	4.26 (6)
Friendly/Positive Atmosphere	4.36 (9)	4.27 (8)	3.95 (13)	4.18 (7)
Faculty Reputation	4.33 (10)	4.13 (11)	4.02 (9)	4.08 (9)
Prestige of Dental School	4.24 (11)	4.07 (12)	3.99 (10)	3.80 (15)
Close Contact with Faculty	4.05 (12)	4.14 (10)	3.89 (15)	4.00 (11)
Employment of Graduation	3.98 (13)	3.90 (13)	3.90 (14)	3.92 (13)
Challenge of Coursework	3.93 (14)	3.84 (14)	3.54 (21)	3.74 (16)
Separate Curriculum	3.90 (15)	3.32 (22)	3.03 (24)	2.85 (25)
Quality of Student Body	3.71 (16)	3.80 (16)	3.68 (17)	3.52 (21)
Focus of Specialty Areas	3.71 (16)	3.84 (14)	3.62 (18)	3.74 (16)
Strong Basic Sciences	3.71 (16)	3.64 (19)	3.55 (20)	3.60 (19)
Annual Tuition	3.33 (19)	3.76 (17)	3.98 (11)	3.96 (12)
Availability of Financial Aid	3.31 (20)	3.43 (21)	3.75 (16)	3.69 (18)
Small Class Sections	3.29 (21)	3.57 (20)	3.57 (19)	3.53 (20)
Overall Cost of Degree	3.26 (22)	3.73 (18)	3.96 (12)	3.89 (14)
Urban Location of Campus	3.24 (23)	3.24 (24)	3.32 (23)	3.17 (23)
Cost of Living Expenses	2.90 (24)	3.27 (23)	3.38 (22)	3.37 (22)
Opportunity to Conduct Research	2.83 (25)	2.99 (25)	2.75 (25)	2.93 (24)
Social Life	2.79 (26)	2.89 (26)	2.56 (27)	2.63 (26)
Housing Opportunities	2.36 (27)	2.62 (27)	2.61 (26)	2.52 (27)

There appear to be very few differences between the four categories of respondents with regard to the importances of specific characteristics of dental schools. The rank ordering of the importance ratings is virtually the same in the top ten categories. Quality related issues are of concern for students at all levels. Factors such has "cost", "location" and "housing" appear to be less important factors in the school selection process.[17]

Information Sources

In examining the choice process of dental school candidates, one area of interest and concern was the sources of information that students rely on (Table 6).

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[17] It should be noted that while financial aid ranked very low in terms of overall importance, this variable was identified in a discriminant analysis as the strongest predictor of non-applicants. Moreover, the second strongest predictor of non-applicants was concern about tuition.

For purposes of this study, there was a desire to examine both the formal (under direct control of the university) and informal (outside the control of the university) types of information that students avail themselves. Specifically, survey respondents were asked indicate the influence that various information sources had on their dental school selections process.[18] Those sources of information that were relied on with the greatest frequency were 1) tour of facilities (94.5%), 2) dentist (93.2%) 3) dental admissions interview (89.3%), and 4) dental school student (88.1%).

Table 6

Influences of Information Sources

Sources	Enrollees	Applicants	Inquirers	Prospects
Dentist	4.40 (1)	4.00 (1)	4.05 (1)	4.21 (1)
Tour of Facilities	4.31 (2)	3.98 (2)	3.86 (3)	4.09 (2)
Parents	4.29 (3)	3.73 (8)	3.72 (7)	3.78 (7)
Dental Admissions Presentation	4.14 (4)	3.91 (3)	3.72 (7)	3.77 (8)
Dental Admissions Interview	4.02 (5)	3.89 (4)	3.80 (4)	4.04 (3)
Dental School Faculty	4.00 (6)	3.88 (5)	3.79 (5)	3.85 (6)
College Professor	3.90 (7)	3.27 (13)	3.31 (12)	3.28 (13)
Dental School Student	3.84 (8)	3.80 (6)	3.87 (2)	3.92 (4)
Dental School Alumni	3.74 (9)	3.76 (7)	3.73 (6)	3.88 (5)
Pre-dental Advisor	3.67 (10)	3.51 (10)	3.51 (9)	3.51 (10)
Correspondence with Admissions	3.51 (11)	3.63 (9)	3.48 (11)	3.75 (9)
Financial Aid Office	3.13 (12)	3.34 (11)	3.09 (13)	3.30 (12)
Orthodontist	2.54 (13)	3.28 (12)	3.49 (10)	3.48 (11)

The source of information that was consistently rated as having a strong positive influence was the opinion of dentists. (An informal source of information over which the SDM has very little control.) The formal information source which ranked the highest were the tour of dental school facilities, dental admissions interview, and the dental admissions presentation.[19]

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[18] Respondents were asked to rate each of the sources of information on a scale ranging from 1 to 5. One was "very negative influence" and five was "very positive influence".

[19] Respondents were not asked to evaluate the importance of admissions publications or the SDM catalog on their choice decisions. In light of the information obtained from the GSIA study, it would be interesting to examine these to sources of information in the future for the dental school.

SUMMARY

For both the SDM and the GSIA projects, it appeared that issues of quality were of primary concern. Also, those activities that provided prospective students with a personal touch – contact with faculty or students, tour of facilities, attending classes – appeared to be important influences in the decision making process.

These studies illustrate the initial steps that were taken to gain a better understanding of the factors that have influenced individuals' decisions to attend graduate/professional school. Each project did provide useful information and insight to administrators at the individual schools. Some suspicions regarding comparability (or the lack there of) of financial aid packages were confirmed. The analyses in both cases stimulated new questions that will be explored at a future date.

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